

## Anglo-Saxon Literature and The Epic

- Stories were told **orally in poem or song form** (most people could not read or write)
  - Stories provided **moral instruction**
  - Anglo-Saxons spoke “**Old English**”
  - **Epic Poetry** was one of the most common genres of literature during the period
  - ***Beowulf*** was the most famous story to come out of the Anglo-Saxon era
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## Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Literature

- Anglo-Saxon poetry used several devices, including:
  - Metaphors:** a comparison without “like” or “as”
  - Similes:** a comparison using “like” or “as”
  - Alliteration:** repetition of the initial consonant sound in a line of poetry
  - Caesura:** a pause in a line of poetry

**Kenning:** a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes a noun

### **Repetition**

- Stories were often filled with **violence and gore**
  - Most stories were about **heroic warriors prevailing in battle**
  - Characters were driven by **fate and their courage was tested**
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### **The Epic**

- Epic poems were a very **common form of Anglo-Saxon Literature**
- An epic is a **long, narrative poem that celebrates a hero's deeds**
- Epics were told **in the tradition of oral storytelling** (many people could not read or write)
- Characteristics of oral storytelling

**Stock epithets: adjectives that point out special traits of particular people or things**

**kennings: a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes for one word**

Example- Grendel = “**sin-stained demon**” is used in place of Grendel’s name

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## Characteristics of an Epic

- The hero of an epic is called the **epic hero**
- The hero is usually a male of **noble birth**/high position and is **historical or legendary**
- The hero’s character traits reflect the **ideals of his society** and his actions (often

**courageous** and superhuman) reflect the **values** of his society

- The hero's actions often determine the **fate** of a nation of people
  - The **setting** usually covers more than one **nation**
  - The poet uses formal diction (**word choice**) and **serious** tone
  - Major characters often deliver **long**, formal **speeches**
  - The plot is complicated by **supernatural beings/events** and usually involves a long, **dangerous journey** through foreign lands
  - The poem reflects **timeless values** (courage, honor, etc.)
  - The poem covers **universal themes** (good vs. evil, life and death, etc.)
  - Present day epics: ***Lord of the Rings & Star Wars***
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## *Beowulf*

- *Beowulf* is an **epic**
- The poem begins *In Media Res*, or “**in the middle**” of the action, common for epic poetry of the Anglo-Saxon era
- Beowulf is the **epic hero** in the story; he travels **great distances** to prove **his strength** and has **super-human powers**
- The events described in the story take place in the **late 5<sup>th</sup> Century**
- In the story, Hrothgar, **king of the Danes**, and his people are **terrorized by the monster Grendel**. **Beowulf, a hero of the Geats**, comes to Hrothgar’s aid, **fighting Grendel and Grendel’s mother**.

## Anglo-Saxon Details

***Although the Anglo-Saxons fought among themselves, they had a great deal in common.***

- They used a common language
- They shared a heroic ideal
- They had a set of traditional heroes.
- They were loyal to their leaders and tribe.
- They held a belief of fierce personal valor.
- They admired men of outstanding courage.
- Persons of rank were received with grave courtesy.
- Rulers were generous to those who were loyal
- They had a democratic habit of mind.
- They were hardy and brave
- They had a passion for fine ornaments.

- Literature and the Arts began to evolve during this period.
- Anglo-Saxon poetry was an oral tradition.
- Caedmon was considered the first English religious poet.
- An Anglo-Saxon poet was called a scop.
- He was the memory and historian of the tribe.
- The two most important traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry were the heroic and the elegiac tradition.
- “The Seafarer” is a good example of an elegiac poem.

The most important single poem from the Anglo-Saxon period is the epic ***Beowulf***